THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Any Excellence?

October 11, 1998
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Simply put, the *neglect of courtesy leads to the collapse of community.* Does this sound melodramatic? Think about it. The heart of courtesy is respect for persons; it has less to do with manners than with a manner of relating, a manner that acknowledges the worth of human beings. At the heart of discourtesy is disrespect for people; it has less to do with breaking rules of etiquette than with breaking the tie that binds us together.

Donald McCullough
Say Please, Say Thank You

FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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ANY EXCELLENCE?

Luke 17:11-19; Philippians 4:4-9

> *"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."*
> Philippians 4:8

O God, sometimes we are in such a hurry that we forget even to be human to our dear ones, our colleagues, our friends, and sometimes we are inhuman to strangers we meet. Remind us this morning of your infinite courtesy, of the respect for all your children which is expressed in your unconditional love. Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and minds to your love, which makes all things, even us, new, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen

The shocking thing about the incident, in retrospect, was how frequently it, or something very much like it, happens these days. I was driving south on Michigan Avenue in the left lane. I wanted to be in the right lane in order to make the turn at Chestnut, and so I started my move into the center lane—just as the driver of a new BMW made her move from the right lane to the center. I didn't see her, actually, but she saw me, and blew her horn unnecessarily vigorously, I thought. Perhaps I should have yielded, but I didn't. I accelerated and claimed the spot we both wanted in the center lane, only to be stopped at the light, whereupon she pulled up beside me. I glanced over, to behold a face contorted with rage. She had something she wanted to share with me, so, although I shouldn't have, I put the window down to receive a barrage of obscenities, including a very graphic set of instructions about what I could do to myself. It all happened very quickly, and her anger made me angry and, I confess, I started to respond in kind, and then stopped. After all, I am a minister, maybe even this woman's pastor, and what I am about to say will reduce the rolls of this church by one for sure. So, for once in my life, I stopped, mustered a sheepish smile, put the window up, and pulled away. In my rear-view mirror, I saw her bidding me farewell with the ubiquitous single, raised-finger salute. What a way to start the day. It was so stupid. We were so stupid, both of us.

What in the world is happening to us? What in the world is going on?

A friend of mine, Donald McCullough, President of San Francisco Theological Seminary, wrote in a new book he has just produced:

> "Simply put, the neglect of courtesy leads to the collapse of community. . . . . The heart of courtesy is respect for persons . . . . At the heart of discourtesy is disrespect for other people: it has less to do with breaking rules of etiquette than with breaking the tie that binds us together." (p. 4, *Say Please, Say Thank You, The Respect We Owe One Another*).

We are living in a time of radically diminishing civility and courtesy. Everybody knows, because everyone experiences it, and sometimes participates in it; something of the glue that holds us together as a society seems to have dissolved. *USA Today* asked, in a cover article, "Excuse Me, but Whatever Happened to Manners?," and noted the "growing rudeness, even harshness, of American life.

In the junior high school I attended, over the stage, on the proscenium arch, there was an inscription that I read many times. On graduation day, the entire ninth grade class stood and recited it:

> "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever is just, whatsoever is pure, pleasing, commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

They are words St. Paul wrote to the tiny Christian community in the Greek city of Philippi, in the middle of the first century. They are peculiar words, quite unlike anything else Paul wrote. They are not Judeo-Christian words. The paragraph is a list of classic Greek and Roman civic virtues, and the question students of the Bible ask is what is it doing in Paul's letter to the Christian church? Why is he using Roman culture as a source of ethical teaching?

The situation seems to be this: that particular Christian community had come to be very suspicious of the culture around it. Ridiculed, discriminated against, sometimes persecuted, the early Christians took an increasingly negative view of the world of the Roman culture. Anything Roman must be bad. The Christians were becoming a little standoffish, a little self-righteous, and weren't even living up to the standards of civic courtesy and civility of their neighbors. So, the argument goes, Paul gives them a list of pagan civic virtues, lifted directly from Greek moral philosophy: Roman culture at its best, and said, in essence, this, too, is of God. The way you relate to the world and your neighbors is at the heart of our faith.

It may also be Paul's response to the ongoing propensity of the early Christian churches to argue and contend and dispute, in city after city, to make something of a public spectacle of themselves by publicly fighting. Perhaps Paul is gently chiding his friends and suggesting that they might be at least as decent and courteous as their pagan neighbors.

What is happening to us? Is there any excellence, anything worthy of praise in the arena of public virtue and civility in our day?

Political leaders, unfortunately, have learned the raw political and social power of conflict; racial/ethnic, ideological, and religious intolerance. Sociologist Lewis Closer says,

> "conflict binds groups together: fanatic partisanship helps the insecure maintain boundaries. The conflict need not be realistic. The weapons are never appropriate to the threat. A deeper human need drives the antagonist: he or she must hate Arab and Jew, Moslem and Hindu, Catholic and Protestant." (Martin Marty, *By Way of Response*, p. 75-78).

And, as if on cue, the October 4, 1998, edition of *The New York Times* featured an article on the Balkans, "Past Reason," which described how Mr. Milosevic has masterfully whipped the Serbs into a "delirium of nationalist indignation" against the Albanian people over offenses that either didn't happen at all or were not very significant. Nevertheless, his masterful use of the rhetoric of violence, "rape, genocide, reign of terror," has ignited a level of Serbian violence almost beyond comprehension. There is nothing like racial and religious hatred, it seems, to create and unite a culture against the enemy.

Those who understand us best and love our institutions most deeply want us to wake up to the fact that the process of civic deterioration, sometimes known as Balkanization, has already begun among us.

Professor Jean Bethke Eslhtain of the University of Chicago thinks it is a survival issue. She was here two weeks ago to tell us about a report she helped to write on behalf of the Council on Civil Society. In this important report to the nation from a diverse and bi-partisan group of distinguished scholars, politicians, and corporate leaders, there is a sobering assessment that, "our democracy is growing weaker because we are using up but not replenishing the civic and moral resources that make our democracy possible." The report observes the increasing fragmentation and polarization of American life along with a noticeable decline of respect for persons.

> "Neighbors not being neighborly. Children disregarding adults. Declining loyalty between employees and employers. The absence of common courtesy. Drivers who menace and gesture at other drivers . . . behavior that violates the norm of personal responsibility."

The report reminds its readers that James Madison, in 1788, wondered if there was, "enough virtue to warrant self government." (*Federalist* , 55).

It's a relevant question, is it not?

Kenneth Smith, recently retired President of Chicago Theological Seminary, who served as a member of the Chicago School Board and for one year as its President during very stressful times, recalls the overwhelming anger that surrounded the Board with people shouting obscenities at one another, nobody ever listening, no conversation, no dialogue, just angry, almost violent shouting.

Violent anger - angry violence has become something of a way of life for us. Sometimes it is even celebrated: a professional basketball player chokes his coach, a professional baseball player spits on the umpire and, essentially, is relieved of any responsibility for his behavior; a high school wrestler head-butts the referee, knocking him unconscious. Halfway through the 1996 season, one hundred high school football coaches in Texas were ejected from games, twice the number of the year before. Our own Dick Butkus once said, "I never set out to hurt anybody, deliberately, unless it was, you know, important." (McCullough, p. 33). And just last week, the *Tribune* carried a front-page feature on the increasing number of life-threatening head injuries being sustained by high school football

players. A local neurologist said, "They aren't just tackling out there. They're trying to knock someone into the next county—just like the pros."

Television hammers us with violence and gratuitous sexuality in which there are no commitments, no responsibilities, and no consequences; and a never-ending stream of talk shows celebrating the coarsest of situations, inviting voyeurism and sad dysfunction to a moment of public shame - which is apparently at the same time a moment of glory.

Go to a movie, and for ten minutes before the feature begins, your senses and sensibilities are subjected to an all-out assault, as the previews feature flaming gas balls, bodies propelled through plate glass windows and falling 50 stories, automobiles exploding, street-sweeper automatic weapons in your face.

And language . . . the four-letter word I never heard spoken out loud in mixed company is now used as a noun, adjective, verb, and occasionally adverb—in movies, channel TV, and in casual conversation among smartly-dressed young professionals waiting for a table at Iron Mike's. Several local journalists have expressed their reluctance to comment on the more graphic contents of the Starr report because their grandmothers wouldn't even know what they're talking about, and might ask.

Every feeling does not have to be expressed in a society that wants to be civil. Every anger does not have to be vented. And, every truth does not have to be told.

Donald McCullough, who is a solid conservative, who is rigorously orthodox theologically and ethically, wrote a chapter in his book with the intriguing title, "Tell White Lies Occasionally—Protecting from Increasing Hurt," he describes an incident that happened when he was young and committed to never telling anything but the whole, unvarnished truth. A friend apparently asked him if he didn't think her new baby was beautiful. Apparently, he told the truth and has been regretting it ever since. Even though he knows it takes us into morally choppy waters, he proposes that courtesy calls for an occasional white lie. We don't need Howard Stern's tell-all honesty, and he references Winston Churchill, one of the great truth tellers of all time, who was once told by a woman at a dinner party, "Mr. Churchill, you are quite drunk," to which he replied, "You are right, madam, I am drunk. And you are ugly; but in the morning, I shall be sober." More to the point, he quotes Aristotle, who defined honesty as, "speaking the right truth to the right person, at the right time, in the right way, for the right reason." (p. 26).

Do we need to know what we know and what we are going to be told over and over again in graphic detail about the President's behavior with an intern? A growing and impressive chorus of distinguished Americans is saying, "No," almost pleading for our politicians to stop it.

The *Christian Century* last week asked if we are better off knowing, and if this is necessary for the good of the nation, and if appalling personal moral violations are really worth the attention of Congress and the whole nation, and suggests the answer is clearly, "No."

Former President Gerald Ford agrees. He knows something about the topic of public integrity and how to move beyond its denigration, and he wrote in the *New York Times* last

week that the American people, "more than a way out of the current mess, want a way up to something better."

In one of the most thoughtful and civil reflections on the whole matter, President Ford, now 85, urges us not to spend the next two years on the matter and proposes a formula for Presidential accountability and a Congressional rebuke that would allow us to attend to the pressing business of the nation.

I am grateful for his civility—his basic courtesy, quite apart from whether or not you agree with his proposal.

One of our most distinguished ethicists, Alistair MacIntyre, pleads for what he calls, "islands of civility, places where the old-fashioned tradition of public virtue can be maintained through the difficult time ahead of us."

I think we are one of these places. I believe the church—the churches—all of us, regardless of our theological, ecclesiastical, biblical, and ideological disagreements, are called by God to be islands of civility--Moody Church and Holy Name Cathedral and Fourth Presbyterian. And I believe that is exactly why St. Paul inserted a list of pagan virtues in his epistle to the Philippians. He wanted that little church to be an island of civility . . . an expression of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; not only to enhance civic virtue, but because it translates the very heart of the good news.

The Christian religion is based on the most amazing idea, namely that the God of creation loves the world so much that he sent an only son to live in it and to die expressing that divine love. God loves people: every man and woman—extravagantly, indiscriminately, generously. The good news of our faith is about a truly amazing grace that is extended to and surrounds every human being . . . and has forever transformed the way we who know about this amazing grace relate to one another, not just in church, but in our homes, offices, courtrooms and classrooms, our conference rooms and dining rooms and bedrooms—and on our city streets.

Civility and courtesy are at the heart of what we profess as followers of Jesus Christ. When English New Testament scholar J.B. Phillips first translated the New Testament into modern English, he put a wonderful phrase in the famous 1 Corinthians 13 love soliloquy: "Love is slow to lose patience—it looks for a way of being constructive . . . . Love has good manners . . . ."

And it was Dame Julian of Norwich, a gentle, 13th century mystic, who saw deeply into the heart of a God who relates to each of us so graciously and generously and kindly, with an infinite courtesy. She wrote,

> "For just as by God's courtesy
> He forgets our sin from the time of our repentance
> Just so does he wish us to forget our sin and all our depression and all our doubtful fears."

God's courtesy

> "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Amen